

Mother of Pulitzer Prize Winner Dies

Thelma Toole Worked Decade to Get Dead Son's Novel Published

By BURT A. FOLKART, *Times Staff Writer*

A mother who devoted a decade of her life to getting her dead son's novel published and then gloried in its winning the Pulitzer Prize has died in a New Orleans hospital.

Thelma Ducoing Toole was 82 and died at St. Charles General Hospital of what was described only as a long illness.

Her son, John Kennedy Toole, committed suicide in 1969, nearly 10 years after he had written "Confederacy of Dunces."

His frustrating struggle to find a publisher was blamed for his inhaling automobile exhaust fumes at the age of 32.

Trudged to Publishers

After his death, Mrs. Toole spent years trudging from publisher to publisher, trying to convince others of her son's talent. She finally prevailed on author Walker Percy to read the manuscript and he used his influence to get it published.

It sold 50,000 copies in hard-cover and 600,000 in paperback within three years of its publication in 1980.

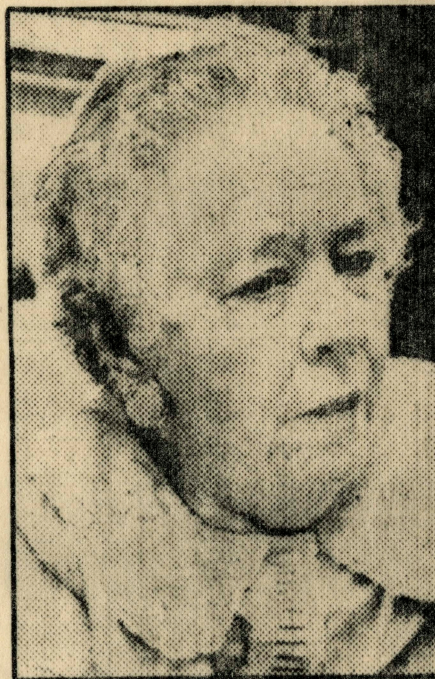
"Dunces" is a boisterous portrayal of Ignatius J.

Reilly, who rebels against what he sees as the modern world's lack of symmetry. Toole wrote the book, set in New Orleans, while stationed with the Army in Puerto Rico, and his protagonist has been likened to a modern-day Don Quixote, whose idealistic efforts to improve and inspire those he meets end in a series of comedic disasters.

When the book won the first posthumous Pulitzer in history, Toole's Creole mother remembered the long struggle that finally ended in Percy's office:

"They told me I was biased." But "it is a classic. It appears to be a comedy, but underneath it is full of philosophy and insight. It is magnificent."

For the last few years literature clubs frequently solicited Mrs. Toole to recite the life story of her son and of



Thelma Toole

her battles to see his work in print.

"He wanted the literary recognition, not the money," she would tell them.

Although she struggled for years for her son's second novel, she resisted the publication of his first.

It was learned after her death Friday that she had filed a lawsuit to prevent publication of "The Neon Bible," a novel about a boy growing up in a small Southern town. Toole had written the book in 1954 when he was 17 and had submitted it for a contest. Like his second book, it was rejected.

Mrs. Toole's brother, Arthur Ducoing, said he did not know why she opposed publication of that book but had planned to ask her as soon as she recovered.

And Percy, her one-time benefactor, said he also was puzzled.

"It (the earlier book) shows a style that most of us have to work very hard for many years to perfect."